

Reflections on my National Service and how it changed my life forever

I was among the last that were called up for National Service having turned 21 in March of 1960. I had done an apprenticeship in auto mechanics after leaving school so I was understandably conscripted into the Army Air Corps in the mechanical engineering division. After growing up in a small town in Hampshire, I was actually looking forward to seeing a bit more of the world. Ironically, the first leg in the journey sent me to the Army Air Corps training center at Middle Wallop Airfield in Stockbridge, which as it turned out, was less than an hour drive from my home in Hampshire. I had a car at the time, so was Mum was happy because it meant I could come home on weekends. We trained on the repair and maintenance light aircraft engines and safety procedures.

From Middle Wallop we were sent to the Royal Mechanical Engineering Depot at Poperinghe Barracks Arborfield in Berkshire to be readied for deployment overseas. The deployment was to be to Malaysia at the end of June 1960 to support the wind down of the Malayan Emergency. The Army Air Corps was supporting arial observation using light aircraft to fly low over the dense jungle canopy to identify terrorist camps and aid ground troops.

The first challenge was getting my passport sorted as I had never been anywhere that required one previously. I and a few other chaps lugged all our kit to London by train and then on to Stansted airport for the flight to Singapore which would be our initial posting. The Army had chartered a British United Airways plane for the transport and it would take two days to get there. We started off late owing to mechanical trouble at the start which was ironic since we were a plane load of aircraft mechanics. The first leg took us to Turkey for refueling and more mechanical trouble so we had a bit of a layover. Then we went on to Bombay India where we stopped again for fuel and were able to stretch our legs. India was hot like I'd never experienced heat before. We finally made it to Singapore and my first impression was boy was it hot and the smells were certainly memorable but not in a good way.

I was stationed in Singapore for about a month during which we had a bit of free time so I set about looking to buy a car to be able to be a bit independent. The automotive mechanics training I had back home served me well and I was able to pick up a four-seater Vanguard that wasn't running for relatively little money and get it going again. I finally got my orders which would be sending me on to the small camp set up at Ipoh airfield where the Army light aircraft operations were. I would be split up from the other chaps I came over with, one would be sent to Taipei and another was staying in Singapore so I was a bit

disappointed we weren't staying together, but as I had a car, I was hoping to be able to visit them.

I drove from Singapore to Ipoh which was the capital of the state of Perak and a decent size town. The air corps operations were outside of the main town and rural to say the least. Not much more than tents set up along a dirt airstrip and a few buildings made out of timber with grass roofs. The billets were sparse but thankfully equipped with mosquito nets. The "mossies" were fierce and would invade every evening so we sure were grateful for the nets. Our flight was responsible for maintaining the Taylorcraft Auster Mk.9s that were used for reconnaissance over the jungle to monitor for the communist groups that were still hiding there.

Most days were spent working on the "kites" as we called the airplanes in the 100+ degree heat out on the airstrip. The usual uniform consisted of a pair of short pants and shoes and that was the extent of it. I'd brought a coat with me from home which hadn't been touched since we never stopped sweating after we left England. I wrote home to ask mum to send soap which had become rather expensive due to all the showers we were taking and the local stuff being so harsh you could clean an engine with it.

The days were long and hot and there wasn't much else to do else except guard duty, radio training and going to the naffee club. I wrote home regularly, dad sent copies of Motorsport and mum told of the wet dreary weather and updates they were making to the bungalow. Things at the camp were pretty uneventful but we had a few incidents of kites going out and not coming back. In one case the plane and pilot were never found. Another time we had information about where the kite had gone down but the jungle was so dense that it took days of arial reconnaissance before the crash site could be located. The pilot was injured so a rescuer stayed with him for another few days to provide cover from the insurgents and so a clearing could be made in the jungle canopy to allow a helicopter access for the extraction.

As a flight mechanic, I was responsible for signing off on the airworthiness of the aircraft's engine. If the kite had a mechanical issue during the flight, the mechanic would be held responsible so we were always a bit on edge if a kite didn't come back when expected. In order to keep us on our toes, the mechanics were required to go up on the first flight test whenever work was done on the engine. On one occasion I suspected a problem with an engine that I was not responsible for which could have had some trouble in the air. I communicated my concern to the flight leader that if that kite went up, there was a good chance it would not be coming back. He was your typical hot headed, headstrong officer who had no time for suspicions. When the kite came back with practically no oil pressure as I predicted, he quickly changed his tune.

Since I had a personal car, I was able to go into town on the rare days off. Ipoh had a good selection of restaurants where I tried the local food like satay and nasi goreng which was quite a bit more spicy than I was used to but I came to very much enjoy. The first time I tried the local coffee I was a bit baffled. I had ordered coffee with cream but when it arrived, it appeared straight black. I asked the server for the cream when he motioned to me to stir it and miraculously the cream appeared from the bottom of the cup. Turned out they use condensed milk in coffee so it falls to the bottom until you stir it.

I began to frequent one of the restaurants in town and struck up a relationship with a local girl named Shirley who was working there. She spoke English pretty well due to all the British expats and military personnel that were living in Ipoh. She and her friends and some of my mates from the camp went out to the pictures and picnics regularly. I had the little Vanguard which was a four-seater so on days off we packed up the car and took road trips to the Cameron Highlands, Pankor Island, Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore on some treacherous, winding roads. That little car served me valiantly and all told, I did nearly 10,000 miles in it during my service until we ended up driving into a river one dark night.

When my national service time was coming close to ending there was some question as to whether we would be returning back to the UK as there was turmoil in Laos that was stirring up. There was also talk of being deployed to Germany. Shirley and I were becoming close and I did not like the idea of returning home and leaving her behind. I wrote to mum and dad about Shirley and the idea of her coming home with me which I'm certain came as quite a shock to mum. We looked into the idea of getting married in Malaya but the camp CO who was a surely chap was not supportive in the least. The only way the British consulate would allow Shirley to come to the UK was if we had assurances from the local Hampshire registrar that we would be married shortly after she arrived otherwise, we would need to purchase a round-trip ticket. My savings were meager at best and not enough even for the one-way boat passage from Malacca to Marseille. On top of all that, Shirley would need a passport which was another ordeal. There would be assurances and a monetary contribution to her family to help care for her mother and sister and many other complicating factors along the way that made the idea of us being together in England seem impossible. I had considered signing on to stay in the service or even getting a job with a Malayan airline company as a way to stay in the country. But as an only child, I was concerned what impact that would have on mum and dad and how often I would be able to return home to see them, particularly as I was their only child.

Our unit was being moved to Kluang to support ariel observation of ballistics accuracy so it was becoming even less likely that Shirley and I would be able to stay together much longer. Shirley had been living with her friend in Ipoh but the family's circumstances were changing so Shirley's situation was also now in limbo. I won't go in to all the details but suffice it to say that at the 11th hour, everything fell into place, the passport was granted and

through the grace and favor of friends and family, a ticket was secured and passage was booked for Shirley to sail to the UK. I finally received notice that my national service was not going to be extended. I came home to Hampshire in October, 1962 and took up a position at the local garage where I had done my automotive mechanics apprenticeship.

Shirley boarded a ship in December, 1962 for the two-week journey from Malaya to Marseille, France and a boat train to Southampton with just a verbal assurance that I would meet her at the station on the other end and we each kept our end of the bargain. We married in a church in my home town and it caused quite the sensation in our small village as I was likely the first local boy to be marrying a girl from Malaya. The story of our wedding and how we met was reported in the local paper.

At first, we lived in a caravan on mum and dad's property where our first daughter was born in 1964. Our second daughter came along in 1966 at which time we had bought lovely little semi-detached down the road from mum and dad. Shirley was getting used to the cold and all things British and it turned out her friend from Ipoh had also come to England. I was working on typical British cars of the time in a local garage called Cooper's and things were chugging along nicely.

Then by chance, I saw an advertisement in the local newspaper looking for a mechanic to work on British cars in California in the United States. On a whim I contacted the bloke who said the position was located at a garage in a town called "Altadena" in California. He would go on to offer to sponsor me to come to the United States and help find a place for us to stay. Without too much consideration, and admittedly without too much conversation with Shirley, I decided to go to California and see what it was all about. Ultimately, I decided to stay and Shirley and the girls joined me some time later in 1968. The story that our little family was immigrating to the United States was also reported in the local paper!

Fast forward and we have now been living in California for 57 years in the same town we immigrated to in the foothills of the San Gabriel mountains just outside Los Angeles. I made a lifetime career out of repairing and restoring classic British cars from Roll Royce's to Mini Coopers and I have had the opportunity to run my own business and meet some fantastically interesting people. With credit to Shirley's tenacity, we managed to scrape enough savings together to achieve the American dream and buy a house in Altadena in the early 1970's and it was the home we raised our two daughters in. There were challenging times along the way but we ultimately paid off the mortgage. I had planned to keep working for as long as I could but a few strokes and poor eyesight put an end to that some years back.

Both of us are in our 80's now, we settled into a routine of enjoying the beautiful California scenery from our front porch that looked out over Los Angeles all the way to the ocean.

That was until the night of January 7th, 2025. That night a wildfire driven by hurricane force winds destroyed our house and over 9,000 other homes and businesses in Altadena. The devastation was unbelievable and many people lost their lives. Our eldest daughter who also lives in Altadena and her husband made sure we evacuated to safety but along with our home of 53 years, a lifetime's collection of classic cars, all mum and dad's belongings that were shipped over from the UK after they passed and our beloved cat Bluejay were lost.

The months since the fire have been a blur and thanks to my daughter, Shirley and I are set up in a small apartment not too far from where our home was. We plan to rebuild our house but at our age or I suppose any age, it is a daunting task. My daughter has been on a mission to try to replace some of the items we lost in the fire. She remembered the medal that I had received some years back given by the Malaysian government as a thank you to the people that had served during the Malayan conflict. Unbeknownst to me, my daughter reached out to the National Malaya and Borneo Veterans Association to enquire as to the possibility of replacing my Pingat Jasa Malaysia medal. The Chairman of the Veteran's Association, John Measham was quick to reply that unbelievably, he had one medal remaining and having heard what happened, was happy to dispatch it to me.

I credit my time in the service in Malaysia as setting the direction for my life and without it I would not have met Shirley. Together we have weathered many storms, this current one may be the most difficult yet but we will get through it. I would like to thank all the mates I came to know and spend time with during my service as I look fondly on those memories now. And I would like to give a very special thank you to Mr. John Measham for answering my daughter's enquiry and returning to me a small token of remembrance of a time in my life that was so poignant. The medal will take pride of place in our new home.

With Gratitude,

L/Cpl. James (Jim) Rickman
REME/AA 60-62 2 RECE Flight
Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia
1960 - 1962







Ashley 'Groom met Bride in Malaya



A COUPLE who first met while the 'groom was serving with the Army in Malaya were married on Saturday at St. Peter's Church, Ashley, by the Rev. M. Vonberg. They were Mr. Robert James Rickman, only son of Mr. and Mrs. R. N. Rickman, of The Burbles, Gorsefield Road, New Milton, and Miss Susan Yew Mooi, of Ipoh, Malaya. The bride, who was given in marriage by the 'groom's father had made her own wedding dress which had a short net over taffeta skirt with satin rosebud trimming and a patterned lace bodice. She also wore a bouffant veil held by a coronet of orange blossom, and carried a bouquet of white rosebuds, lilies and fern.

Mr C. Prowse, a friend of the 'groom, acted as best man.

Photo: N. H. Gossip. After a reception held at the home of the bridegroom's parent, the couple left for a touring honeymoon, the bride wearing a cheong sam of heavy cream satin embossed with gold, and a matching coat. Flowers were supplied by the Petite Fleuriste, Station Road, New Milton; and catering was by the Dorothy Cafe, New Milton.



